

professional moralists is to ignore the fact that precisely similar ideas were accepted in circles which could not be suspected of any unnatural squeamishness as to the arts by which men grow rich. The best commentary on ecclesiastical doctrines as to usury and the secular legislation on similar subjects, for, at least to the middle of the sixteenth century, their leading ideas were reflected in it. Plain men might curse the chicanery of ecclesiastical lawyers, and gilds and boroughs might forbid their members to plead before ecclesiastical courts; but the rules which they themselves made for the conduct of business had more than a flavour of the canon law. Florence was the financial capital of Europe ; but even at Florence the secular authorities fined bankers right and left for usury. In the fourteenth century, and, fifty years later, first prohibited credit transactions altogether, and then imported Jews to conduct a business forbidden to Christians.*⁴ Cologne was one of the greatest of commercial entrepôts ; but, when its successful business man came to make his will, he remembered that trade was perilous to the soul and avarice a deadly sin, and offered what atonement he could by directing his sons to make restitution and to follow some less dangerous occupation than that of the

merchant.⁴⁵ The burgesses of Coventry fought the Prior over a question of common rights for the best part of a century ; but the Court Leet of that thriving business city put usury on a par with adultery and fornication, -ajidji^reed J3^ could become mayor, councillor, or ^master of the gild.** It was not that laymen were unnaturally righteous; it was not that the Church was all-powerful, though its teaching wound into men's minds through a hundred channels, and survived as a sentiment long after it was repudiated as a command. It was that the facts of the economic situation imposed themselves irresistibly on both. In reality, there was no sharp collision between